

MME. ROLAND.

A STUDY OF HER LIFE FROM NEW LITERARY MATERIAL.

MME. ROLAND. A Biographical Study. By Ida M. Tarbell. Pp. 122. Charles Scribner's Sons.

A wealth of new material makes this book a thoroughly original study of Mme. Roland and her character. As usual in such cases, the result has been to restore to humanity and to the world a figure that was too flawless and too much idealized for this world. In a certain degree Mme. Roland was one woman in her memoirs, written with a conscious autobiographic purpose, and another in her letters, which depicted the emotions, the fancies, the illusions, the convictions, of a given moment. It mixes up one's notions of martyrdom to learn that this woman, who for a time ruled France as if she had been its queen, and was sent to the guillotine for a political accusation, really welcomed death for the exclusively feminine reason that she loved another man better than she did her husband. Nor is it less startling to learn that this enthusiastic republican once made the most strenuous efforts to secure a title of nobility for her husband and herself. Ardent republicans, however, should not take this as a sign of moral obliquity. It was really incidental to another far greater contrast in the life of Mme. Roland when she, born and bred in Paris, a citizen woman to her finger-tips, adapted herself easily and contentedly to the narrow life of an economical estate in the country, winning the hearts of the poor by her kindness, and giving a glow of comfort to a household in which there was a mother-in-law of the proverbial description. Mme. Roland seems not to have liked this aged and testy lady. She gave to her dislike a wider expression among her friends than was necessary. But, as usual, time brought its revenge. To the daughter of Mme. Roland is due, at least remotely, the somewhat damaging frankness of the present volume. Mme. Roland had herself been outspoken. She had not found her growing daughter as brilliant as she expected from her judgment of her own powers and her faith in the methods of Rousseau. It was an unpardonable offense that she should have declared her child to be lacking "in depth of sentiment and keenness of intellect." The girl, Eudora (Mme. Champagnon), though she lived to be nearly eighty years of age, never forgave the slight. She gave her reverence to the memory of her father.

Roland seems to have deserved this tribute from his daughter. But he does not emerge unscathed from the author's historical crucible. He was opinionated, intolerant, a man of action, one when he should have been a man of words, whose defects of judgment were aggravated rather than otherwise by his wife at critical junctures, not only in their own affairs, but in those of their country. Such is certainly the estimate of Roland that is to be found in this book. The light cast upon the novelties of these two personages is one of the merits of this volume. Mme. Roland was a woman of admirable traits and training, a living model for her daughter; while her father, an engraver, painter and enameller, with the capacities of a tradesman, was an object of more or less criticism, might change his aims but never his inspiration. In a critical period of girlhood Mme. Philon was enthusiastically religious, luxuriating as deeply in the passion of piety as Mme. Guyon, of whom it was said—by herself perhaps—that for prayer she neglected her household. Afterward there came the time, unusually prolonged in her case, of waiting for a desirable husband. The suitors were so many, if Mme. Philon's confessions are to be accepted, as to draw from the author of this book the satirical remark that the young lady was one of those who believed a possible love in every man she met. Her objection to tradesmen was insuperable. She developed into a wish, with some naive restrictions, for the lifelong companionship of a man much older than herself. Thus, by the mere action of time and the gradual removal of other men, M. Roland, a man of science and an encyclopedist, became her favorite. An unhappy life at home after the death of her mother aided to make her willing to marry. But yet, with some perversity, she talked of friendship rather than love, and drove Roland into hopelessness and bewilderment by her moodiness, especially as shown in her letters. One might imagine that this discontent would be increased by the responsibilities of marriage. But Mme. Roland, while cherishing almost exaggerated respect for her husband as a man of learning, soon found that her own literary powers were just the complement of his. He could gather the data for a treatise, but he could not express his thoughts with simplicity and directness. His wife adapted herself to his needs. She was his secretary, his adviser, and time and again his works were practically her work of saying what he thought.

For years things went on in this way. To his wife's initiative Roland owed in great measure his political advancement, which near the last days of Louis XVI, and again under the rule of the Girondists, placed him at the very head of affairs. Mme. Roland, while she clung to the tradition that women should take no public part in politics, was incessantly active in the circle over which she held sway. To her as much as to any one of the Revolution and the Republic owed their existence, and, according to the volume in hand, it was to her that the failure of both in the time of the Terror was largely due. A skillful man wielding the power that she wielded would have taken account of every human force that came to his hand and would have made such use of it as he could. He would have allowed no prejudice to deter him from accepting all the aid proffered to him. It was felt by the leaders of the masses, by men like Danton, that Mme. Roland was the real power behind the Girondists. Nobody could have made greater efforts to placate her than Danton. It is glorious to imagine her riding the frightful tempest that was soon to come and turning it to something less hateful that it was to be. But the thought is vain. She could not endure. She confessed his mental power. But she revolted at his presence with an unconquerable physical repugnance. A mere whim left the Girondists helpless victims of as merciless a tyranny as ever existed.

In the midst of these disorders and defeats, Roland soon showed how little he was fitted for action. He gave people reasons of advice which were useless; but, even when it was his duty to take the responsibility and to give commands, he evaded it. If Mme. Roland had been more decisive, he would have seen his task more clearly. But she, too, was wanting at the crisis. The author of this book says her failure as the unwieldy queen of the Republic was due simply to the fact that she was in love with Buzot, deputy in the constituent Assembly from Euzat, Normandy. Buzot was a nervous, earnest man, in the midst of affairs which dismayed Mme. Roland. He had elegance of manners and taste in dress that pleased her, and she was critical in such matters. Besides, he had the positive virtue that seemed to presage success, and she was weary of her husband's failures and blind to her own share in the blame. But the solution which she gave to the problem that vexed her was enough of itself to prove her supremacy. She was frank with both her husband and Buzot. She broke the hearts of both, as the saying is. A true wife, but not a very submissive one, she kept them both the devoted slaves of her political purposes until the storm broke which separated them, sent her to the guillotine, Roland to suicide and Buzot to a death, which to this day remains partially a mystery. With the details which have now been added to the narrative.

Mme. Roland's life and death are the perfection of tragedy. There is not wanting even the final requirement of the Greek drama that the protagonist should deserve her fate and blindly hasten to it. The book is well illustrated, especially with portraits of Mme. Roland, most of which, however, it is explained, are apocryphal. An interesting family tradition, which helps criticism on this point, is that Mme. Roland never had her portrait painted except in profile.

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